DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 154 257 CG 012 406

AUTHOR Walker, Betty A.; Mehr, Marilyn
TITLE Psychotherapeutic Experiences Among Gay Professional Women: Helping or Hindering?
PUB DATE [73]
NOTE 17p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; *Females; *Homosexuality; Information Dissemination; Labeling (of Persons); *Professional Personnel; *Psychotherapy; Research Projects; *Self Concept; Sex Discrimination; *Therapists

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper and film project was to examine the effects of psychotherapy on a sample of gay professional women. A videotape film of a group interview with six professional women between the ages of 30 and 50 was produced in which the following issues were discussed by the group members in the film: why they sought psychotherapy; what the attributes were that they looked for in a psychotherapist; how the psychotherapist's biases affected the therapeutic relationship; what changes occurred in their senses of self, sexual preferences, relationships with both men and women, careers, and willingness to disclose sexual preferences to others; and what recommendations they had for psychotherapists working with gay professional women. Following the group interview, the film concluded with a discussion by Dr. Evelyn Hocker, noted researcher on homosexuality, who provided guidelines for psychotherapists treating gay professional women. The most important concepts derived from this work are that great care must be taken in using any psychotherapeutic intervention or treatment based solely upon sexual object choice. The therapist must be aware of and reevaluate his or her own biases, attitudes and behaviors and their consequent effect on the therapeutic relationship in working with gay professional women. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED154257

PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC EXPERIENCES AMONG GAY PROFESSIONAL WOMEN: HELPING OR HINDERING?

Betty A. Walker, Ph.D.

University of Southern California

Department of Counseling

University Park

Los Angeles, California 90007

and

Marilyn Mehr, Ph.D.

Childrens Hospital of Los Angeles

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. Walker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

CG012406

Psychotherapeutic Experiences Among Gay Professional Women:

Helping or Hindering ?

The Women's Liberation Movement as well as the Gay Liberation Movement have finally helped bring to the public's awareness the vast range of expression of female sexuality. Few studies have even observed female sexuality in a "normal" heterosexual relationship, let alone admit the strength of female sexuality in masturbatory, bisexual or homosexual expressions. Even those who have studied homosexuality have focused mainly on male patterns of behavior, and largely ignored the Lesbian population. Those women who were studied often represented the more obvious stereotyped homosexuals who had little to lose through disclosure of their sexuality. For these reasons, little is known regarding the gay professional woman, and still less is known about her experiences in, and reactions to, psychotherapy. Minimal information exists as to the biases encountered by the patient through both subtle and overt pressures exerted by the therapist, and the positive and negative outcomes involved in psychotherapy with gay professional women. Since there has been such a lack of knowledge about these patients, obviously there has been

little opportunity to study and share effective psychotherapeutic learnings and research findings.

A review of the literature showed no specific investigations to date of the effects of psychotherapy upon lesbians, much less lesbians in professional occupations. However, the few descriptive studies found on lesbians contribute somewhat to our ability to infer the results of psychotherapy for gay professional women.

Although we cannot review studies on psychotherapy with gay professional women since they are unavailable, we can at least review studies on the lesbian personality. The descriptive studies of lesbians can be divided into projective and non-projective, depending upon the diagnostic instrument used. The projective approaches have looked for evidence of the classical analytic theory of homosexuality as applied to women, whereas the non-projective seek out a more conscious self-report of behavior and functioning.

Projective Studies

The first statistical inquiry attempting to validate the psychoanalytic approach to lesbian psychology was by Armon (1). A clinician administered the Rorschach and Draw-a-Person tests to 30 members of a homophile organization and 30 matched controls. No differences could be found between groups on perceptions of males as threatening and overpowering, nor could any evidence be found of increased masculine emphasis in the

Rorschachs or figure drawings of homosexual women. Armon's study found evidence that lesbians experienced less gratification in human relationships, have inhibited emotional reactivity, and were more anxious and uncertain about body image and sexual identity than were controls. However, the lesbian group showed no differences in psychopathology from the controls, suggesting that their conflicts may simply be different than those of heterosexual women.

The most comprehensive study of lesbians was that of Hopkins (2, 3), who studied 48 nonpsychotic homosexual and heterosexual women individually matched for age, education, and intelligence. She reaches a different conclusion than Armon in her findings of a more inhibited emotional reactivity in lesbians, and also reports a significant difference in the deprecation by sex, with half of the lesbians' deprecation responses directed against women, while half the heterosexual women's responses were directed against men.

Armon and Hopkins both found that hostility and anxiety about women were more frequent on the records of lesbians, indicating that disturbed relations with the mother may contribute to the development of homosexuality in women.

Gundlach and Riess (4, 5) obtained over 100 figure drawings from a lesbian and control group, and scored the drawings for field dependence and independence (6). Field independence, a cognitive characteristic associated with certain personality traits more commonly found among

men in this society, such as self-reliance and independence, was found in the lesbian sample. The incidence of hostility, aggression, and anti-male attitudes were the same in both groups.

Findings based upon the use of projective instruments in these studies must be reviewed with careful scrutiny since each researcher has defined the problem independently, with little or no reference to previous findings. In addition, criteria for content analysis scoring on projective tests have not been specific, preventing the data from being reliable and replicable.

Non-Projective Studies

A remarkably different view of the lesbian population is seen from the results of psychometric techniques and personality inventories. When the emphasis is upon current conscious functioning and behavior, the lesbian presents a personality profile similar to that often associated with successful males in this culture.

Freedman (7) administered the Eysenck Personality Inventory and the Personal Orientation Inventory to 62 members of the Daughters of Bilitis and 67 members of a national service organization. There were no significant differences found in general psychological adjustment between the two groups, nor were there any differences on the Eysenck scale. Both groups scored similarly on capacity for intimate contact, and considered interpersonal rather than sexual relations more important for happiness.

There was some indication in Freedman's study that the lesbian sample was actually better adjusted than his controls. For example, there were lower scores on Eysenck's lie scale, as well as greater acceptance of self and aggression in the lesbian population. The lesbian subjects appeared to be more independent, inner-directed, and self-actualized than the control group. Such conclusions are clearly discrepant with those previously found by Armon.

Hopkins (2) also did a descriptive study using Cattell's 16 PF Questionnaire on the same lesbian population tested with projective instruments. Her findings showed the lesbian group to be significantly more reserved, detached, critical and tense. They were also seen to be more dominant, assertive, progressive, self-sufficient, and more Bohemian. There were, as Freedman found, no differences in neuroticism.

Wilson and Green (8) showed that heterosexual women (100 matched volunteers) were higher on the Eysenck neuroticism scale. The lesbians again scored higher on such measures as dominance, endurance, capacity for status, and intellectual efficiency, as measured by the California Personality Inventory.

Siegelman (9) studied 84 lesbians and 133 control volunteers and found that lesbians were less likely to give socially desirable answers, and that they scored higher on measures of goal directedness and self-acceptance. Lesbians also had lower scores for depression.

Psychometric studies clearly show a different psychological portrait

of lesbians than do projective studies. The non-projective studies uniformly show lesbians to be no more neurotic than their controls, and more dominant, autonomous, assertive, and detached--more like the stereotypic male. Critical comparisons of new data are difficult for the same reason as they are with projective test data, because so few attempts have been made to replicate, refute, or even consider other researchers' findings.

It is obviously impossible to generalize these research results to a population of gay professional women because all of the research samples are taken either from a psychiatric population or from a homophile organization. One cannot help but question how representative these women are of the lesbian population, in general, much less of the gay professional woman. Further research into this population is clearly necessary before any assumptions can be made about this group.

Purpose

The purpose of this study and project was to identify and examine the different experiences that gay professional women have had as patients in psychotherapy. Such identification and examination might allow practicing psychotherapists to examine their perceptions and beliefs about gay professional women in order to understand these patients better and to improve their psychotherapeutic relationships.

Method

Initially, the limited research available on gay women was reviewed by the authors, prior to undertaking the project. From this review it became apparent that information on the narrower area of gay professional women appeared to be nonexistent. A study was undertaken in which videotape film of six gay professional women from Los Angeles discussing their experiences in psychotherapy was produced, and included a commentary by Dr. Evelyn Hooker, noted researcher in the area of homosexuality. She concluded the film by suggesting guidelines for effective psychotherapy with gay professional women.

The videotape film produced consisted of a group interview of gay professional women who are active and successful in professions in education, fine arts, business, medicine, and psychology. Clients and friends and relatives of clients seen by the authors in private practice were canvassed for participation in the taping sessions. Gay professional women who had had psychotherapy and expressed an interest and willingness to participate were chosen. Problems encountered in soliciting film participants centered on the issue of disclosure. Since gay women who were professionally successful were being sought, they had to consider the real consequences of losing status or positions if their gay life styles became known. The participation of the six group members who finally consented to the film project was based on their personal commitment to the "cause" or presenting knowledge and understanding in an area

vital to them, trust in the authors, and the assurance of limited releases for the showing of the film. The following questions were discussed in the film by these gay professional women related to their experiences in psychotherapy:

1. What in your life as a gay woman prompted you to seek psychotherapy?
2. What were the personal and professional attributes that you looked for in a psychotherapist?
3. How did the psychotherapist's biases and life style affect the development of a genuine relationship between you?
4. What changes took place as a result of psychotherapy, in:
   a. your sense of self
   b. your own sexual preferences and activities
   c. your relationships with both men and women--straight and gay
   d. your career development
   e. your willingness to disclose your sexual preferences either personally--to friends and family--or professionally --to colleagues?
5. What suggestions can be given for avoiding hazards, and to promote growth in the gay professional woman entering and continuing in psychotherapy?.

Following the group interview, Dr. Evelyn Hooker discussed the film and presented guidelines for working with gay professional women.

Results and Discussion

All of the women interviewed in the film stated that it was not the fact that they were gay that prompted them to enter therapy. Being gay was not seen by them as a problem or an unacceptable life style. The reasons given for seeking psychotherapy were similar to those which most people proffer, to wit, an inability to cope with life situations, lack of personal and professional satisfaction, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships.

When asked what personal and professional attributes they were seeking in a psychotherapist, all of the group members responded that empathy, understanding and warmth were important. Half stated they were specifically seeking a woman therapist since they felt a woman might more readily possess and exhibit these qualities. The other three said that the sex of the therapist was inconsequential. All indicated that it was of no significance whether the therapist was straight or gay. All of the gay professional women, themselves highly educated, were seeking someone also highly educated and licensed either as a psychologist, psychiatrist, marriage counselor or social worker. Five of the women obtained a psychotherapist through the personal communication of a friend, the sixth by contacting a gay community service referral agency.

Next, the discussion in the film centered around the issue of the biases and life styles of the psychotherapists with whom these gay professional women had worked. Two of the women had been in psychotherapy with gay therapists, although they did not become aware of the therapists being gay until well into the therapeutic relationship. Both of these women related that their therapists' sexual orientation was unimportant to the relationship. Two of the women related that their first therapists were heterosexual, one a male therapist and one a female therapist. These two group members believed they were very adversely affected by their therapists' strong, overt biases against homosexuality. Both patients sought other therapists and found two who were also heterosexual but who did see being gay as a viable life style and with whom they developed fine working relationships. The final two gay professional women had good therapeutic relationships with heterosexual female therapists.

Each of the gay professional women in the film reported that without biases against homosexuality their experiences in psychotherapy positively affected their self-concepts as worthwhile, productive and contributing individuals. All stated that their sexual preferences remained gay with two of the women stating that their choice of partners was now more "suitable" and lasting. One of the women, who had been with her partner for 22 years, stated that her relationship had been salvaged by entering

therapy. In terms of the gay professional women's relationships with both men and women--straight and gay--all remarked that the quality of these relationships had improved and they were able to accept men more readily as persons and as friends--but not as sexual partners.

Again, half of the group members stated that their careers were greatly enhanced by psychotherapy. All three of these changed careers without regret and with remarkable success.

Unanimously, all the gay professional women in the film agreed that the issue of disclosure, personally or professionally, of their sexual preferences was unresolved. The amount and place of disclosure varied with each. One woman was open with all friends and colleagues, but, as she stated, "I'm in the closet with my family. To them I would be a queer." When asked if she had dealt with this in therapy, her response was that she had, but never resolved the issue.

Two others had disclosed to family but not to professional colleagues and had no intentions of so doing for fear of negative consequences. The remaining three women had been selective in disclosing with friends, family and colleagues--choosing carefully when and where to share. As one group member stated, "No one wants to be cast out, either," --the title chosen for the videotape film

Finally, the emphatic suggestion offered by these women for psychotherapists working with gay professional women, centered on the acceptance by the therapist of a gay life style as being a viable one

where the therapist did not impose his/her values on the patient.

At the conclusion of the group interview with the six gay professional women, the authors interviewed Dr. Evelyn Hooker. The two areas focused upon in the filmed interview with Dr. Hooker were her reactions to the film presentation and any guidelines she might offer to psychotherapists working with gay professional women. Dr. Hooker's responses in the film were as follows:

Initially, Dr. Hooker praised the film as an educative contribution to a field where there is a paucity of knowledge and an abundance of misunderstanding. Next, in referring to the film production, Dr. Hooker stated that it was obvious from the participants that no gay stereotypes existed where gay professional women were concerned. She also stated that she strongly believed that the problems were the same for straight or gay patients in psychotherapy except for the area of disclosure as to life style. Here, she felt, very real difficulties existed because of the possibility of losing professional positions. Unfortunately, such real, deleterious consequences to disclosure still existed.

In addressing the topic of guidelines for psychotherapists working with gay professional women, Dr. Hooker presented the following ideas:

First and primary, being gay must be seen as a viable life style and not as a perversion. As Dr. Hooker stressed, in spite of the two APA's positions on homosexuality not being a diagnostic aberration, such

thinking still persists in the psychological community.

Next, it is essential, as was pointed out in the film, that the therapists work with the goals of the gay patient, not the superimposed goals of the therapists. "If this is not done, disastrous consequences might ensue," according to Dr. Hooker.

Another issue addressed was the necessity of straight therapists working with gay professional women to gain a knowledge and understanding of the gay life style. Dr. Hooker emphasized that this was not to be done by having the gay patient educate the therapist but rather by extensive reading and preferably, by the therapist having gay friends. Without such knowledge of the "gay life," its social structure, concerns and organization, the therapist is hampered and ineffectual at best, and destructive at worst.

Dr. Hooker also raised the issue of disclosure, so predominant in the film. For this issue she stated she had no one specific guideline but suggested that each instance should be treated separately with the real consequences, personal and professional, considered carefully. Dr. Hooker did state that the reasons for disclosing to family, friends or colleagues be evaluated to determine if they involved growth-producing, guilt-reducing and intimacy-enhancing reasons, rather than for shock, revenge, or blame.

In conclusion, Dr. Hooker emphasized the need for further research and education of both the public and the psychological community about

gay professional women in order to increase understanding and psychotherapeutic effectiveness.

Although this study has examined a relatively small sample of gay professional women, it has raised many significant questions for future study and validation. Until a clearer personality profile can be determined for the lesbian population, and especially the gay professional woman population, great care must be taken in using any psychotherapeutic intervention or treatment based solely upon sexual object choice. Until further knowledge is gained, this project may contribute to the therapist's re-evaluation of his or her own biases, attitudes and behavior, and their consequent effect upon the therapeutic process in working with gay professional women. The use of the videotape film at professional workshops has been an effective educational tool to enhance and increase understanding of the gay professional woman.

References

Armon, V. Some personality variables in overt female homosexuality. Journal of Projective Techniques, 1960, 24, 292-309.

Freedman, M. Homosexuality among women and psychological adjustment. Dissertation Abstracts, 1967, 28, 4294 B.

Gundlach, R., & Riess, B. F. Self and sexual identity in women. In G. F. Riess (Ed.), New directions in mental health. Vol. 1. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1968.

Gundlach, R., & Riess, B. F. The range of problems in the treatment of lesbians. In D. Milman & G. Goldman (Eds.), The neurosis of our time: Acting out. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1973.

Hopkins, J. The lesbian personality. British Journal of Psychiatry, 1969, 115, 1433-1436.

Hopkins, J. Lesbian signs on the Rorschach. British Journal of Projective Psychology and Personality Study, 1970, 15, 7-14.

Siegelman, M. Adjustment of homosexual and heterosexual women. British Journal of Psychiatry, 1972, 120, 477-481.

Wilson, M., & Green, R. Personality characteristics of female homosexuals. Psychological Reports, 1971, 28, 407-412.

Witkin, H. A., Lewis, H. B., Hertzman, M., Machover, K., Meissner, P., & Wapner, S. Personality through perception. New York: Harper & Row, 1954.